
Pitch Perfect Performances Win Stem Cell Agency's Elevator Pitch Challenge

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San Francisco, CA – It was a communication person's idea of heaven. And many scientific researchers' idea of hell. Try to explain what you do, why it's important and why the public should care in 30 seconds, using only everyday English – no jargon allowed.

That was what we asked stem cell researchers to do in the first ever CIRM Elevator Pitch Challenge. And they responded magnificently. Some used humor, some used passion, some just spoke as clearly as they were able.

And the winners are... well, we'll have that shortly. But first.

The goal of the Elevator Pitch Challenge was to help researchers who get funding from the stem cell agency, the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), do a better job of communicating with the public. After all, we are a publicly funded agency and the money we use to fund research comes from the people of California, so it's only reasonable to expect researchers to be able to explain the importance of what they do to Californians, and anyone else they might meet.

We invited any researcher who gets funding from us to prepare a 30 second pitch, making sure to follow the basic outline of keeping it short, simple and something anyone can understand. We videotaped their pitches at the 2013 CIRM grantee meeting in San Francisco – although some researchers videotaped their own and sent them in online – and invited the staff at CIRM to vote on who they thought did the best job.

We ended up with 57 videos representing 18 different institutions from UC San Diego in the south to Humboldt State in the north. All of the video entries are available on the CIRM website. Some of the pitches were from students in our Bridges program - which focuses on undergrad and master's students hoping for a career in science – some were from researchers at the early stage of their career, and some were from scientists who are considered preeminent in their field.

The judges were faced with a tough task but, being scientists themselves, they applied rigorous rules to deciding the winners. Brevity, clarity and creativity were vital (anything over 35 seconds lost points). And people were asked to turn a blind eye to clever graphics and special effects (however entertaining) that some researchers added to their videos before sending them. Then we divided the entries into two categories: Lead Scientists (those who have their own labs or have been doing research for quite some time), and non-Lead Scientists, younger scientists at earlier stages of their career.

When the votes were tallied, it was remarkably close – but the winners are:

Non-Lead Scientist

- 1st. Jonathan Lam (UCLA, stroke)
- 2nd. Suzanne Peterson (Scripps Research Institute, Parkinson's)
- 3rd. Michael Rothenberg (Stanford, intestinal cancer)
- 3rd. Anica Sayoc (City of Hope/CSU Long Beach, leukemia)

Lead Scientist

- 1st. Amy Sprowles (Humboldt State U., cancer/Bridges Program)
- 2nd. John Zaia (City of Hope, HIV/AIDs)
- 3rd. Paul Knoepfler (UC Davis, cancer stem cells/epigenetics)

The prizes for winning aren't quite on par with our multi-million dollar funding awards, but the first-place winners in both categories do at least get to choose a \$50 gift certificate from either Starbucks or Amazon.

One pitch also deserved a special award category unto itself:

Most creative and original

Asaf Presente (UCSD, lung disease)

"While this was a fun event it also had a serious purpose," says Alan Trounson, PhD, President of the stem cell agency. "It's essential that stem cell scientists learn how to talk clearly and engagingly about their work. Without public support this kind of research is almost impossible to do. While you can't explain a lot in 30 seconds if you are engaging and passionate enough about what you do, you can get someone's attention and make them interested enough to want to know more."

There's more information about the contest, plus the runners up on our website.

About CIRM: CIRM was established in November 2004 with the passage of Proposition 71, the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Act. The statewide ballot measure, which provided \$3 billion in funding for stem cell research at California universities and research institutions, was overwhelmingly approved by voters, and called for the establishment of an entity to make grants and provide loans for stem cell research, research facilities, and other vital research. Learn more about the agency: www.cirm.ca.gov.

Contact:

Kevin McCormack

415-396-9813

kmccormack@cirm.ca.gov

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